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David D. Oberhelman

Oklahoma State University Library, davido@okstate.edu

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On Navigating Labyrinths and Webs: Print and the Internet as Institutions of Research

by **David D. Oberhelman** (Associate Professor, Humanities-Social Sciences Division, Oklahoma State University Library, 306 Edmon Low Library, Stillwater, OK 74078; Phone: 405-744-9773, 405-780-7260; Fax: 405-744-7579) <davido@okstate.edu>

I have decided to frame this reflection on the comparative value of the print world of books and journal articles, and the new world of Internet and pages on the World Wide Web as aids to research, around an account of a reference question I recently received from one of my colleagues at a small university. As the literature bibliographer at a large academic library, I am often called upon to assist my colleagues here as well as colleagues from other libraries with difficult questions in the Humanities that require rooting around in very obscure volumes. This reference librarian approached me with a request to locate a poem by the French writer **Pierre de Ronsard** about a fourteenth-century Albanian freedom fighter named **Gjergj Kastrioti** or **Scanderberg** (the spelling of this title varies widely). The patron who had asked the question could not recall where he had read about this poem, but remembered several sources saying that **Ronsard** had written about the Albanian. He and the librarian had used what resources they had available at a small academic library, so they forwarded the request on to me for further investigation using the resources of a larger institution. As I plunged into a morass of Renaissance French literary research in an attempt to uncover the elusive **Scanderberg** poem, I gained new insight into the differences between print and the Internet as information technologies, tools the scholar can manipulate to dig out the information they contain, but also as what I term institutions of research—tools that embody within them a set of rules and conventions governing how they are created, used and stand in relation to other types of information. I realized that researching this question in print and online had led me into two types of labyrinths in which the answer might be buried. In the process I concluded that the Internet, de-

spite the robust possibilities it opens up for the access and generation of knowledge, continues to have limitations for in-depth research because of its lack of classification and documentation, the two ingredients that make the print world a more solidly constructed and more navigable maze than the unstable “web” of cyberspace.

My first impulse was to turn to the complete editions of **Ronsard's** works and the standard critical sources for the study of Renaissance poetry, the print sources that form the basis of traditional literary scholarship. After consulting various reference works about French literature and looking through the contents of **Ronsard's Oeuvres** (using the “proper” editions listed in the critical sources), I was completely unable to find any mention of an Albanian warrior amidst his numerous odes and occasional poems about well-known French historical figures. I then delved deeper into the stacks to look through books of criticism about the poet and his period but still turned up no clues after consulting most of the traditional sources for **Ronsard** studies. My trek through the critical sources did give me some possible clues in the form of references to other essays and tomes, so I dutifully followed those paths even though they offered no insight. Indexes of the journal literature on **Ronsard** such as the *MLA Bibliography* and the *French XX Bibliography* also yielded no leads. There were ample references

articles to historical odes and poems about other unusual legendary figures such as Merlin, but **Scanderberg** was not mentioned and even the footnotes in the articles I read were silent. At this point I changed tactics and started looking for historical accounts of Albania hoping to find a thread to grasp. Using various catalogs such as **OCLC's WorldCat** and

other comprehensive sources for cataloging and classifying the book world, I found only one book-length study of **Scanderberg's** life in English which luckily was in our local holdings. This book does list some artistic works inspired by the fighter such as a poem by **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** (a piece that I easily found in his *Complete Works*), a brief account of his fortunes by **Montaigne**, and a number of operas written about him; but **Ronsard's** name never appears.¹ My research using print sources proved fruitless, and I had reached a dead end. Nonetheless, I felt confident that the lack of any references to that **Scanderberg** poem in the well-researched books and articles I had consulted was a sign that the patron's claims that multiple sources discussed the poem had been in error. If there had been such a poem by **Ronsard**, I reasoned, there would have been some hints, some breadcrumbs sprinkled through the labyrinth of the printed word in the form of notes or bibliographic citations that would have pointed me in the right direction. The lack of evidence for a **Ronsard** poem thus became a reassurance because I was confident that all possible avenues of research using established book and journal sources had been exhausted.

Finally, with little hope for success, I turned to the labyrinth of the Web for answers using as a guide the search engine **Google**, the starting point for many research ventures nowadays among the undergraduate and even more advanced clients in my academic library. It was there that I stumbled upon the multiple sources the researcher had apparently used as his authority and also learned why the search had been so confusing for patron and librarian alike. After plugging in a search for “**Scanderberg**” (using several variant spellings) and “**Ronsard**,” I received about fifteen promising hits. Suddenly encouraged by the number of Web pages linking the two names, I pulled up a page entitled the “**Gjergj Kastrioti-Skenderberg**” from the domain “**Albanian.com**,” a commercial informational site about the history and culture of Albania.

As I skimmed the page, I discovered the sentence that inspired the patron's quest to find the poem: “**Skenderbeg's** [sic] posthumous renown was by no means confined to his own country The sixteenth-century poet **Ronsard** wrote a poem about him and so did the nineteenth-century American poet **Longfellow**. **Antonio Vivaldi**, too, composed and opera entitled *Scanderbeg*.”² The passage gives no title for the poem and there was no documentation to help the reader locate the poem. There is a brief bibliography at the end of this biographical essay, but it consists of only

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banish them. The state does not destroy our books; the university disjoins them. We place them in vaults or we displace them with Web stations, television studios or other “media rich” diversions. Through these and other powerfully symbolic gestures, we say books are peripheral with less and less to offer our minds. But the scorn of books in the name of information access is Orwellian; it constricts access, constrains the mind and cheats our students.

In *The End of Education*, **Postman** argues

that “technology is here or will be; we must use it because it is there; we will become the kind of people the technology requires us to be; and, whether we like it or not, we will remake our institutions to accommodate the technology. All of this must happen because it is good for us, but in any case, we have no choice.”²⁰ We have become, in **Thoreau's** words, the tools of our tools. But this is only because we act as if we do not have a choice. We do. If we want the book to have a future, we must not merely create one. We must also have the courage and take the time to guarantee it.

Endnotes

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that one book about **Scanderberg** that does not mention **Ronsard** and a generic Albanian history book. The claim that **Ronsard** composed a poem about this Albanian leader is therefore completely unsupported. Accordingly, I had to look at some of the other sites that came up in the **Google** search to see if they do a better job of identifying the poem.

Much to my dismay, however, I found that all the other pages in that set of results were merely copies of the text of that **Albanian.com** page without any additions or, except for one or two cases, any credit given to the original site hosting that biography.³ The biographical sketch had even been translated into Albanian, German, Italian and French without any changes (except for one page which mistakenly labels **Ronsard** a nineteenth-century poet). There were indeed multiple sources testifying to the existence of the **Scanderberg** poem, but they all repeat the same text and offer no bibliographic support for the claim that **Ronsard** had penned a **Scanderberg** ode. The Web pages gave me no assurance that **Ronsard** did in fact write a poem about the Albanian warrior because all the pages put forward the same statements without any additional supporting evidence. All these different sources simply mirror each other and use themselves as their sole authority with no external corroboration. I, like the patron who had probably done the exact same search in **Google**

before me, found myself at an impasse in my hunt for a path through the information sources. Once again I was trapped in a labyrinth, only this time it felt more like a trick of smoke and mirrors than a solidly constructed structure of information the researcher had to navigate.

The problems I encountered using the Web instead of print sources to research this tricky question illustrate the differences between those two institutions of research and why it is important for both researchers and casual searchers alike to exercise caution when going online. The most fundamental distinction between print and the Internet as formats of information with their accompanying sets of rules and conventions for how to use them is that the myriad works in the print world stand in some knowable relationship to each other, whereas the Internet sources, because of their almost ephemeral nature, can never have stable links to each other. In other words, print sources refer back to each other and are from the moment of their first appearance placed in connection to works that came before them and even to works that come after them. This connection is what we call "collocation," the various classification systems created to ensure that items stand next to similar items both physically and intellectually. In scholarly terms this connection takes the form of citation and documentation, which guarantees that new books and articles enter into the ongoing discourse of academic fields (such as French literature or Albanian history) and are thus available for consultation. The ever-shifting world of the Internet with its inherent lack

of permanence and scholarly discipline renders all efforts to collocate and document information sources an almost impossible task.

The metaphor of the labyrinth is one I have used in describing my attempts to navigate through multiple resources to answer the **Ronsard** question, one which is fairly common in literary discussions of libraries as archives of human knowledge. Yet, as I mentioned, the labyrinth of the library with its often-confusing passages and barriers is a solid structure that can be learned and therefore conquered. In *The Name of the Rose* the scholar and novelist **Umberto Eco** goes into great detail sketching out the misleading corridors of a medieval Benedictine library designed to hide potentially dangerous books from readers' eyes. His image of a library whose secrets are known only to the librarian and his assistant and whose holdings can literally kill those who pry into secrets they should not know is one that captures the sentiments of many library users. The fear of all those dusty, dark tomes has led many to turn to other sources such as the Internet. Yet the library in **Eco's** novel is one that does have a basic order to it that the protagonist, a wily English Franciscan sleuth, can eventually discern amid the apparent chaos. There is a basic classification scheme based on the geography of the known world, and once the monk discovers the principles governing how the books are shelved, he can solve the mysteries of both the library and the murders that have occurred at the abbey.

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In a similar fashion, I, too, learned how to wind my way through the labyrinth of books and articles on sixteenth-century French poetry and even the more obscure recesses of my institution's book collection to see if I could track down the **Scanderberg** poem. Knowing that any research question can be tackled by first deciding what branch of knowledge encompasses it and then what place in the classification system of the library encompasses that branch, I can easily hone in on the right reference tools and other resources likely to contain the answers. Library catalogs can help the researcher locate specific titles and find the right place in the classification system that would have the relevant material. Coming from one of the rare academic libraries in this country still using **Dewey Decimal Classification**, I immediately knew that my investigation would take me to the floor housing the 800s (Literature) and then to the stack ranges with the 840s (Literatures of Romance Languages) and finally to 841 for poetry in French. After reviewing the sources in that section and all the major reference sources for French literature, I knew that I had done a reasonably complete search for the poem. There would, of course, be books not owned by our library, but union catalogs, inter-library loan, and appeals for assistance to colleagues at other libraries can make even those hard-to-find sources accessible. My brief sojourn in the 940s (general history of Europe) covered the remaining territory in the library stacks. Having a research map to follow proved to be an invaluable benefit, even if the map merely confirmed that the destination I sought was a myth.

Endnotes

1. See Noli, Fan. *George Kastrioti Scanderbeg (1405-1468)*. New York: International Universities Press, 1947.
2. "Gjergj Kastriot—Skenderbeg." <http://www.albanian.com/main/culture/famous/skenderbeg.htm>. Retrieved 31 October 2002.
3. The Albanian.com page does have a 1998 copyright date which is earlier than those on the others, and a few of the pages contain a link to that site. It, therefore, appears to be the first instance of that biographical sketch; no author or date of composition is specified.
4. Bill Katz observes in his history of the printing industry that common identifying features of the book such as the title page were not present during the earliest days of the book trade, but quickly evolved as printers realized that they had to safeguard the fruits of their labor as well as protect the rights of the author (*Dahl's History of the Book*. Third English Edition. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1995). The title page establishes each book as a unique entity and enables it to be captured and recorded for posterity (in the Library of Congress, in *Books in Print*, and in all the other repositories of knowledge).
5. Lawrence, Steve. "Accessibility of Information on the Web." *Nature* 400 (July 8, 1999), 107-109.

Books and articles cannot be published without their own "birth certificates"—signs that locate them in the world of printed information such as the author's and publisher's names, ISBNs, ISSN and copyright information that establish their legitimacy and place in the universe of letters.⁴ Catalogers and indexers then record when they came into existence and allow researchers to know that they exist. The books and articles themselves must therefore pay homage to their forbearers by including footnotes, endnotes, references lists, and other conventions to document the sources of information their authors used in writing them. Much academic research is done by following the footnote trail found at the bottom of pages, and now with the advent of citation indexes and other formal tools for capturing the content of notes, citation searching has become a vital part of scholarly activity. The expectation within scholarly publishing is that every printed work needs to acknowledge its indebtedness to other printed works. Many books and articles do not live up to that expectation, but centuries of business practices and legal precedent have made it difficult for authors and publishers to quote without credit, or at the extreme, plagiarize from other works. This attention to documentation further enmeshes books and articles in a symbiotic relationship to each other. They depend on each other for their information and therefore construct their own genealogies of indebtedness to outside sources. This interdependence of print sources lends them credence and makes them reliable, if sometimes frustrating and complex, tools for a dedicated researcher to employ when examining difficult questions.

The Internet, as I learned while digging through hits on **Google**, throws almost all of the basic tenets of order and citation, and forms its own rules based no doubt on the philosophy of "cut and paste." There are, I hasten to explain, many excellent, scholarly sites available on the Web today; and their number is increasing as the medium becomes more mature and established. But the vast majority of documents on the Web resemble the myriad **Scanderberg** biographical pages that have proliferated on servers across the globe. Most Web pages stand in isolation to other pages and frequently appear and disappear without leaving any proof that they ever existed, and that anonymity prevents the Web from achieving any semblance of order or regularity. Labyrinths such as the print world have boundaries and passages known at least to their builders. But the Web, true to its name, is an organic, dynamic medium which resists containment and hence is unknowable; there is no single spider or crawler capable of knowing all that is out there in cyberspace.

In his 1999 study of Internet search engines, **Steve Lawrence** estimates that no one search tool indexes more than about 20 percent of the World Wide Web,⁵ and that figure has to be even lower today, given geometrical expansion of the Web in the new millennium. Faced with such a vast amount of the unindexed sites on the Internet, no researcher can ever hope to grasp the structure of information on the Web, much less find a classification system that can organize it. Subject directories such as **Yahoo** and other commercial and nonprofit directory sites

offer very selective categories to classify the Web, but they miss even more pages than the search engines because they often rely on pages submitted by their creators or known to the indexers compiling the database. As a result, the Web remains an uncharted expanse of information orphaned from other sources and any given page on the Web remains just that, a mere page divorced from any context that can give it meaning and importance. Indeed, the **Scanderberg** pages I found, the ones that **Google** happened to have in its database at that moment, came from an indiscriminate combination of commercial sites, personal pages, and international sites without any pattern or means to locate other related sites on the same topic that could confirm or amplify the statements about **Ronsard**. Many of those pages have no doubt become dead links by now, and many others have undoubtedly been created or were created in the past and simply missed by the search engines. The print world would never allow over 80 percent of books or journal articles published to go undiscovered or unrecorded in some index, but the conventions of the Internet allow for such anarchy in its organization. Researchers can never rest assured that they have found all the information that might be out there if they rely only on the Internet and accordingly cannot judge the credibility of any assertions they encounter in that medium. The Web is always in flux, and that inherent instability prevents any researcher from ever reaching closure or an end to investigation.

The alienation of the Web extends to the lack of documentation within the pages themselves. The footnotes in the **Scanderberg** pages are perfunctory at best, and give no aid to the researcher. Moreover, the blatant plagiarism evident in those pages reflects a culture in which information is not cited, but cut from its home and pasted into a new document with little or no credit to the original source. The Internet is still developing its rules for acceptable scholarship, and the failure of countless Web pages to identify authors and to plunder information from other sources while paying lip service to copyright laws indicates the extent to which the online environment lags far behind print, both academically and ethically. Perhaps because the Internet is still for the most part a self-publishing forum in which the restrictions imposed by book and journal publishers can be circumvented, authors on the Web frequently border on intellectual piracy. Researchers suffer greatly because of this piracy, for they are ultimately unable to trust anything they read online. Despite the numerous instances of the **Scanderberg** biography on the Web, I now doubt more than ever the accuracy of what I read, and the climate of doubt the Internet thus engenders is detrimental in the extreme to any research venture.

In the end I was forced to tell my colleague that I believed that **Ronsard** did not write a **Scanderberg** poem and that the patron had been misled by Web pages that most likely gave faulty information (it could be that the author of the **Scanderberg** biography had conflated **Montaigne** with his contemporary **Ronsard**). I do leave open the possibility that I have over-

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A Bookseller Views the Future of the Book

by **Jim Presgraves** (Bookworm and Silverfish, 401 Church Street, Rural Retreat, VA 24368, P.O. Box 639, Wytheville, VA 24382; Phone: 276-686-5813; Fax: 276-686-6636) <bookworm@naxs.com> (see <http://www.bookwormandsilverfish.com/contact.htm> for more)

This article will share a captivating bibliodote, discuss points of probable change in the book trade and identify points that probably won't change. It is important to know that the author speaks only from experience (catalogs issued since 1972) and not for any group. Readers are invited to supply additional ideas, take issue, extend congratulations or buy books, as listed at the end of the article.

Bibliodote: At 4:30 a.m. one recent August day a bulldozer finished covering some 200,000 books consigned to the landfill to clear their former home for a new purchaser. The former school had closed after the death of its founder, and the board had given the library to a new college and held it for two years, pending the new college's logistics, only to be told weeks before delivery of possession of the building, "We don't have space, and we don't have money to rent storage until we can build." Board members called the writer who salvaged many of the better titles, but the rest were overcovered that August day. Crime? Well, the destroyed material did include many multi-volume serials (most now on CD-ROM or fiche), superceded editions, broken sets, etc. Crime? Well, who should be convicted? Board of the new school?

Technologists who invented micro-compressive techniques? Board of the closed school? Publishers who begin new editions before the previous edition has been shipped from the warehouse? Or was it one of those inevitables like the collapse of the WYE OAK?

I. Changes in the out-of-print *Booksellers' World*, sometimes

driven by "instant gratification," are seen, without priority, in ease of entry into the field, use of reference works, customer base, book sources, format for convenience and change in booksales procedures.

A. The ease by which a novice can commit mistakes is the corollary to the ease of entry into the bookselling field. Suddenly everyone with access to the Internet can be a bookseller, just copy blindly other entries for the same book, maybe factor in condition. Never mind that the book isn't a true first edition: call it the first *Reader's Digest* condensed edition. Never mind that the copied entry, two volumes in one, lists both the pagination and the number of plates for volume two only (well, I took it from the last page). Never mind the typographical error which priced at \$225 instead of \$22.50. Never mind that copying the original component of a description may be a violation of copyright. Everybody's an expert. Some of us call it bibliographic auto-cest. And the best revenge is to locate a sleeper from the dealer who "guessed" at the price.

B. Reference works will diminish in use and economic value. The trend has already started doing this, and it will not reverse, again thanks to the Internet. Compare auction prices for a long run of auction records sold twenty years ago with a comparable run sold today. For a long time the **Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America** has used as one criterion for membership the size/quality of a dealer's reference collection. (The writer has about 3,000 reference titles, including a complete set of the *National Union Catalog*.) Does the writer joke when he suggests that brand-new Internet booksellers may be considering a new organization, Fellows Offering Old Literature where applicants will be denied membership if they admit to owning a reference book (well, a dictionary, maybe)?

C. Although the Internet has enormously expanded the customer base, the customer, in turn, can select from as many as fifty offerings of one title. Accordingly, while the base may be greater, competition for sales to this base is equally expanded. This base is shifting in other ways, also: Check the average age of those who attend book fairs. Younger customers could be developed by free admission with high school or college identification. And some of this predicted decrease (let alone training the next crop) may be due to dealers not digging new wells for future dealers: how many dealers encourage new customers by offering free programs to civic clubs or library friends groups.

D. The book source pool change reflects the Internet, also. A good friend now sells on (shhhh!) E-Bay many books that once would have been available to the writer. Many private sellers will check the Net for current prices and scandalize the name of the dealer who will not offer three quarters of the "average" price. Hap-

pily for the book-source pool, some institutions will be divesting low circulation, high maintenance or non-germane titles. Unfortunately, income from these sales will not flow to the bookseller; instead, these funds will go to escalating periodical costs, well-deserved salary increases and to repair the ravages of damned-fool shrink-funded boomeranging car-tax cuts.

E. Book format innovations see the generation of more titles in CD-ROMS (storage), talking screens (visual substitute), audio books (the writer logs over 30,000 miles per year—don't mess with my tapes!), Internet magazines, eBooks and desk-top publishing (the writer has re-published over twenty titles). And the writer now offers a Web page catalog posting which created a 40 percent savings in catalog distribution costs. Take hope, however, for...books on paper best fill the needs of people who read them, store them, manufacture them, and sell them. And there is no evidence that I know of that proves there will be any change in the needs of the people who make and use books. Other forms have been tried and most have failed. "Neat," "new," and "futuristic" technologies that meet the requirements of readers may surface in the future, but for now, books on paper do the job nicely, whether the book is being read at the beach, in a library, in school, or on a subway. It is not the publishers and scientists who will change the future of the book—it is the readers and users of books. And so far, they are not inclined to any change.¹

F. Bookseller procedure changes are seen in the reduction of the number of catalogs issued by a dealer, a reduction in the number of dealers who issue catalogs and a reduction in the number of dealers with walk-in premises. Even auction houses are now paying consigners only 2/3 of the buyer's cost (when a 20 percent buyer's penalty is added to a \$100 hammer price and the seller gets only \$80, that \$80 is clearly only 2/3 of the \$120 paid by the buyer). Wouldn't it be nice for dealers if they could charge something per sale to recover the cost of a \$3,500 booth at a national fair? More and more bookfair exhibitors report success is achieved only through sales to other dealers. "Coattail" fairs will become more prevalent (such as the Garage Fair and the Boston ABAA Fair).

II. Perhaps of equal interest to the changes seen in the book trade's future would be things that will probably remain the same, such as enemies of books, service to customers, pricing vectors, professional standards, legacy as tragedy, nomenclatural escalation and the need for appraisals.

A. Continuing enemies of books may include using them as furniture, tools, as a source for prints and maps and revenge, as well as those who are ignorant and college development officers. The use of books as furniture has, does

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looked some source that would yield an answer to this conundrum and could indeed prove that the Web pages are correct. If any reader of this article has some insight into this question, I would invite any leads. Nevertheless, I do stand by my assertions about the fundamental differences between the nature of print and the Internet as institutions of research. The labyrinth of print sources may be daunting to even experienced researchers, but it rests on a solid foundation that the ephemeral labyrinth of the Internet as yet cannot replicate.